

African-Americans at City Point, 1864-1865

On May 5, 1864, United States Colored Troop regiments (abbreviated as U.S.C.T.) in Brigadier General Edward Hincks' division seized City Point (now Hopewell), where the James and Appomattox Rivers meet. One regiment, the 37th U.S.C.T. used the time they occupied City Point to recruit men who fled into the occupied town.

In the middle of June 1864, Lieutenant General Ulysses Grant made City Point his headquarters and his chief quartermaster, Brigadier General Rufus Ingalls saw the advantage of City Point to serve as the supply depot for the Armies of the Potomac and James, which were operating against Confederate General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.

During the Union occupation, scores of men, women, and children of African descent sought refuge within the Union complex at City Point. One elderly enslaved woman told a Union soldier she came because she heard that "the champagne was a-goan to open." However, living conditions were often squalid or poor at best. The contrabands (as most blacks who entered Union lines were called after the spring of 1861) lived ten to thirty people in one large tent and many of the children were seen with only one article of clothing: a shirt, which often was given to enslaved children by their owner in their early years.¹ Later, a contraband camp was established with wooden barracks.

As they arrived, there was plenty of work for them to do. Some men and women who fled to the Union depot found work as servants to white Northerners who were there such as a woman named, Hannah, who cooked for the Maine, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey State Agents and "Aunty" Miranda who was a cook and maid to General Charles H. T. Collis, his wife, Septima, and their daughter.² A black man named William Barnes, who was born in Saint Louis, served Grant at City Point. Joining Barnes were two other African-Americans, Douglass and Georgianna who presumably had fled behind the Federal lines at City Point.³

Work was often gender-specific however and thus most of the black women who entered Union lines often found work as cooks and especially as laundresses. Medical Director Thomas A. McParlin wrote that the Provost Marshal directed "the negro women who should be brought within the lines of the army...be sent to the depot hospital to act as laundresses."⁴ Enslaved men had rarely been made to clean clothes.

Though some became servants to troops, served as scouts, or enlisted in U.S.C.T. regiments, most of the black men who came to City Point worked as general laborers. Quartermaster General Ingalls wrote "There was an average of some 40 steam-boats of all sorts including tugs, 75 sail vessels, and 100 barges daily in the James River, engaged in the transportation of supplies, and plying between that river and the Northern ports."⁵ Legions

of black men unloaded these ships every day alongside fewer numbers of white laborers. Without a doubt when the wharf explosion occurred on August 9, 1864, the majority of the deaths were those of unrecorded black men who were engaged in unloading supplies.

Not all those who entered the Union lines were fleeing slavery. Free blacks in Virginia were often caught in between the two armies and if they rented or owned property in the countryside, they might lose what they had as was the case with William James of Henrico County. In 1860, James and his wife, Diley, had real estate valued at \$150 and personal property valued at \$200. They also had a newborn daughter, Emma, and some other young children with different last names in their home. In July 1864, Union cavalry camped on his property and according to him “they took everything I had.” This included a mule, one cow, seven hogs, household furnishings and farming implements, 100 pounds of bacon, three barrels of flour, 10 acres of corn, three acres of oats, an acre of hay, potatoes, cabbages and onions; 45 bushels of corn, fencing around his 15 acre property, and even portions of his house. Because of this, William James recalled, “I went off in August 1864, with all my family, with the troops, to City Point. I stayed there in the Quartermasters Dept until the war was over when I went home....”⁶

Unfortunately, because of the antebellum laws which made literacy illegal in most of the South for slaves and free blacks, we do not know the names or back stories for the vast majority of those who entered City Point. Yet, it is undeniable that African-Americans were crucial to the City Point supply depot and this is reflected in General Ingalls’ May 7, 1865 letter to his superior, Brevet Major General Montgomery C. Meigs when Ingalls requested that Meigs inform him:

as early as practicable what disposition is to be made of the force of negroes in the service of our department. This force has been organized with great care. There are many fine drivers and laborers among them, and they would be, in my opinion, found very useful at the depots or corrals which may be established for the collection and care of our army transportation. They are under perfect discipline and are willing and hard-working men. I could easily transfer 1,500, organized in gangs of twenty-five each, with white superintendents, &c. I would recommend that they be distributed to such depots as may be retained.⁷

Exactly what became of the thousands of emancipated and free blacks who were working at City Point is unknown.

Library of Congress Photos of African Americans at City Point:

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/cwp2003004911/PP/>

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/cwp/item/cwp2003000540/PP/>

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/cwp/item/cwp2003000544/PP/>

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/cwp/item/cwp2003004829/PP/>

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/cwp/item/cwp2003004976/PP/>

¹ Francis J. Parker, *The Story of the Thirty-Second Regiment Massachusetts Infantry* (Boston: C. W. Calkins & Co., 1880), also available online at

http://books.google.com/books/about/The_story_of_the_Thirty_second_regiment.html?id=XMKaP9uKWfMC.

² Adelaide W. Smith, *Reminiscences of an Army Nurse During the Civil War* (New York: Greaves Publishing Company, 1911), also available online at

http://books.google.com/books/about/Reminiscences_of_an_army_nurse_during_th.html?id=VZZ3AAAAMAAJ;

Septima M. L. Collis (New York: G. T. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1889), also available online at

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/collis/collis.html>.

³ Ulysses S. Grant to Major Isaac S. Stewart, December 1, 1864, John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, vol. 13 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 48-49; also see letter from Grant to Julia Dent Grant, September 25, 1864, John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, vol. 12 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 206-207.

⁴ *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, vol. 36, pt. 1, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891), 258, also available online at

<http://digital.library.cornell.edu/m/moawar/waro.html>. Hereafter cited as *O.R.*

⁵ Report of Bvt. Maj. Gen. Rufus Ingalls, U. S. Army, Chief Quartermaster Armies operating against Richmond, of operations July 1, 1864, to June 30, 1865, *O.R.* vol. 51, pt 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897), 251.

⁶ Treasury Department, Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 217, Henrico County, Claim of William James, National Archives, Washington, D.C. William James filed a claim for damages to his property in 1875 for \$1,892 but received \$303. It was not uncommon for those who filed successful claims against the U.S. government to not receive the whole amount requested.

⁷ Rufus Ingalls to Montgomery C. Meigs, May 7, 1865, *O.R.*, vol. 46, pt 3, 1125.